



Turkey's Foreign Policy toward Russia: Constructing a Strategic Partner out of a Geopolitical Rival

*Türkiye'nin Rusya Siyaseti:
Jeopolitik Bir Rakipten Stratejik Ortak İnşası*

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Abstract

Ankara enjoys a climate of confidence in its relationship with Moscow in recent years. Unexpectedly, the former Soviet space and the Middle East have become regions of cooperation between Turkey and Russia. Turkey's cooperation with Russia is not only a result of Moscow's decreasing military and political power but more about Ankara's perception of that power. Thus, Turkish-Russian relations have quickly improved after the jet crisis in 2015, as peace and cooperation between the two parties are considered the normal state of affairs. According to this work, material conditions are insufficient to understand fostering relations between Turkey and Russia at such a pace. This article aims to consider the change in Turkish geopolitical imagination and perception of Russia via analyzing the political elite discourse. The article is comprised of four parts. The first part overviews the literature on Turkish-Russian relations to trace the reasons for cooperation in recent years. This work argues that the emergence of Eurasia and Russia as positively constructed geographies in Turkish geopolitical imagination has a pivotal role in strengthening bilateral ties and deepening cooperation. Thus, in the following two sections, the rise of Eurasia in Turkish geopolitical culture and the development of the Russian image from a threatening neighbor to a security partner in Turkish foreign policymaking are respectively evaluated. The article concludes with a debate over the rapid normalization of Turkish-Russian relations after the jet crisis underlining the role of the positive perception of Russia by the Turkish political elite in the process.

Keywords: *Turkish Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Imagination, Russia, Eurasia, West.*

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Özet

Ankara ile Moskova ilişkileri son yıllarda güven ikliminde gelişmektedir. Beklenmedik bir şekilde, eski Sovyet coğrafyası ve Orta Doğu, Rusya ve Türkiye arasında işbirliği yapılabilecek bölgeler olarak ön plana çıkmıştır. Türkiye'nin Rusya ile işbirliği sadece Moskova'nın azalan askeri ve siyasi gücünün bir sonucu değildir, aynı zamanda bu gücün Türkiye tarafından nasıl anlaşıldığıyla ilgilidir. Bu yüzden 2015 yılındaki jet krizi sonrası hızlı bir şekilde düzelen Türkiye ve Rusya ilişkileri barış ve işbirliğinin normal durum olarak kabul edildiği yeni bir döneme girmiştir. Bu çalışmaya göre, Türkiye Rusya ilişkilerinin gelişimini sadece maddi şartlarla açıklamak mümkün değildir. Dolayısıyla, bu makale, siyasi elit söylemi aracılığıyla Türkiye'nin jeopolitik tasavvuru ve Rusya algısındaki değişimi değerlendirmeye çalışacaktır. Bu çalışma dört bölümden müteşekkildir. Türkiye-Rusya ilişkileri literatürünü değerlendiren ilk bölüm son yıllarda artan işbirliğinin izini sürmektedir. Avrasya ve Rusya'nın Türk jeopolitik tasavvurunda olumlu bir şekilde inşa edilmiş coğrafyalar olması, bu çalışmaya göre ikili bağları güçlendirmede ve işbirliğini derinleştirmede belirleyici bir role sahiptir. Bu nedenle, izleyen iki bölümde sırasıyla Türk jeopolitik kültüründe Avrasya'nın yükselişi ve Türk dış politika yapımında Rus imajının tehditkar bir komşudan güvenlik ortağına dönüşümü değerlendirilmektedir. Makalenin son bölümü jet krizinin ardından Türk-Rus ilişkilerinin hızlı normalleşmesini tartışmakta ve bu süreçte Türk siyasi elitinin Rusya'ya yönelik olumlu algısının altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Dış Politikası, Jeopolitik Tasavvur, Rusya, Avrasya, Batı.

Unlike the Cold War years, Russia today is not a geopolitical other for Turkey. On the contrary, Turkey's spatial understandings locate Russia positively, and Turkish-Russian relations have flourished in a climate of confidence. Moreover, any crisis with the West has a multiplier effect on friendly relations between Ankara and Moscow, and Eurasia appears as an alternative geographical axis to the Western world, at least in the Turkish political rhetoric. However, the most striking aspect of the bilateral relationship is its sustainability. Although the Russian military and political power are on the rise at the expense of Turkey, and there are several disagreements in high political issues, cooperation continues to develop. Thus, the present level of partnership is different from the one in the 1990s when Russia was weaker and the power ratio between Turkey and Russia seemed to be more symmetrical. Turkey does not perceive the increasing Russian military might in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean as an imminent security threat, and the Turkish government is willing to foster relations with the Kremlin despite there are many geopolitical disagreements. The tricky point is that the positive construction of Russia in Turkish foreign policymaking materializes when Moscow's assertiveness is more visible in its neighborhood. Accordingly, this paper tries to answer one simple question: Why is Russia

constructed as a reliable partner instead of an expansionist and aggressive neighbor in parallel to Turkish historical memory?

This paper uses Turkish ruling elite discourse to analyze the construction of Russia in Turkish foreign policymaking as a positive actor. The positive image of Russia in Turkish politics not only makes cooperation with Moscow a rational choice but also a moral one for Turkey's value-based foreign policymaking. In contrast to the Western rhetoric, Turkey eschews describing Russia as an aggressor state or Vladimir Putin as an oppressor ruler, which would otherwise make cooperation an unethical choice and conflict a greater possibility. The Turkish elite imagines Russia as a state which shares a geographic homeland, a state tradition, and a leadership style with Turkey. These perceived similarities play a decisive role in constructing Moscow as a partner of Ankara.

The article is comprised of four parts. The first part overviews the literature on Turkish-Russian relations. The next part focuses on changing conception of the West and evaluates the rise of Eurasia in Turkish geopolitical culture. The third part discusses the change of Russian image from a threatening neighbor to a security partner in Turkish foreign policymaking. The article concludes with a debate over the dynamics of the rapid normalization of Turkish-Russian relations after the jet crisis in 2015.

A Literature Review on Turkish-Russian Relations

In February 2016, when the jet crisis between Turkey and Russia was still ongoing, a conference was held in Istanbul. Conference proceedings would be published in the following year. The main target of the conference was to determine the reasons for the crisis between Ankara and Moscow and to evaluate the strength of relations. Mutual suspicions, historical and geopolitical rivalries, and the difficulty of deepening relations are common themes discussed in the book, which was fairly titled "Distrust and Neighborhood" (Özcan, Balta & Beşgöl, 2017). Another conference on Turkish-Russian relations was held in December 2016, just a few months after the crisis was over. The psychology of this conference was highly different from the first one, as can be understood from the title of "Deepening Turkey-Russia Relations" (Perceptions, 2018; Doklad, 2018). It was organized by a collaboration of Center for Strategic Research and Russian International Affairs Council, Turkish and Russian think tanks directly linked with the foreign ministries. Two conferences held in 2016 before and after the jet crisis well portray the two-faceted relations between Turkey and Russia: competition and cooperation, mistrust and confidence. Accordingly, there is already a rich scholarship on the Turkish-Russian

relationship trying to evaluate the limits of cooperation, possibilities of furthering partnership, and risks of a conflict.

Öniş and Yılmaz (2016) argue that the relationship between Ankara and Moscow will continue to be “*a mix of competition and cooperation*” (p. 87). The fragility of cooperation and the ambiguity of future intercourse are mainly due to the relationship’s characteristics. Almost no one is certain about the steady development of relations since divergent policy perspectives may ruin the cooperation. Baev and Kirişçi (2017) define the partnership as ambiguous and argue that Ankara and Moscow are both reluctant to develop their relationship (p. 1). The lack of institutionalization (Balta, 2019, p. 69) and the power asymmetry in favor of Russia (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 84) are considered underlying reasons for the unstable cooperation. According to Baev and Kirişçi (2017), the future of bilateral relations will not be anything but further volatility (p. 1).

However, the current cooperation has emerged stronger than previously assumed. Thus, the analyses of recent years are somewhat more optimistic about the future of bilateral ties between Ankara and Moscow than the analyses of two decades ago (Kubicek, 2020). Russia, a geopolitical rival and historical antagonist of Turkey, is considered a trustable friend. Although the cooperation is not based on shared ideological or geopolitical objectives, the endurance of the cooperation is obvious. Recently, scholars are trying to find out the reasons for Turkey-Russia rapprochement with a multi-causal (Balta, 2020) or multilevel analysis (Erşen & Köstem, 2020).

In the first years of the 1990s, just after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, geopolitical competition between Ankara and Moscow was evident, particularly in the former Soviet space (Sezer, 2000, p. 63-64; Erşen, 2011, p. 265-267; Çelikpala, 2015, p. 122-125). Meanwhile, despite Turkey and Russia were not very successful in eliminating geopolitical differences, economic ties continued to foster. In the 2000s, the two countries have been increasingly successful in managing, though not settling, their geopolitical divergences. The cooperation between the two countries is frequently explained by the successful compartmentalization of economic matters and geopolitical rivalries (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 72). The primary determinant of the course of bilateral relations in the 2000s is mutual economic gains, particularly in the energy business (Erşen, 2017b, p. 148; Erşen, 2011, p. 264-265). Despite their geopolitical divergencies in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Ankara and Moscow evolved into significant trade partners as they realize that their economies are complementary, and the economic gains are too valuable to be risked because of political cleavages

(Erşen, 2017b, p. 148; Yanık, 2015, p. 368-370; Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 76). However, after the jet crisis, the success of compartmentalization has also been questioned. According to Erşen (2017a), both countries act like they do not have any problems, although the problems are still there, and the conflictual areas continue to have the potential to result in a crisis like the one in 2015.

In recent years, Ankara and Moscow have succeeded in developing diplomatic mechanisms to build a military dialogue regarding the Syrian Civil War, which can be portrayed as a good example of *“political and military dialogue”* (Erşen, 2017). Köstem calls the security cooperation in Syria after 2016 a *“geopolitical alignment”*, claiming that there are limits and obstacles for long-lasting security cooperation, because their foreign policies regarding the future of Syria are unlikely to converge (Köstem, 2020, p. 2-16). Deepening relations into a genuine strategic alliance or long-lasting security cooperation seems very unlikely because of many discrepancies between Ankara and Moscow in the region (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2016, p. 81-85; Larrabee, 2010, p. 168).

It should be noted that the discourse is mostly more favorable than the practiced partnership (Çelikpala, 2015, p. 118). The usage of benign language and avoidance from a provoking tone despite geopolitical rivalry is not new. Sezer (2000) pointed out that reality in 2000 when she coined the bilateral relationship as a *“virtual rapprochement”* (p. 62). Voluntary silence in the policy circles about conflictual areas has become an established practice in time. Accordingly, the Turkish government avoids blaming the Russian authorities publicly in its *“overt friendship and restrained competition”* (Weitz, 2010, p. 61). Thus, the conflicting foreign policy objectives between Turkey and Russia are unwillingly remembered only in crisis times because of Ankara's strategy of silence.

Besides successful compartmentalization of economic and political issues, the researchers have figured out two more drivers of bilateral cooperation: the decrease of the Russian threat, and the deterioration of their relations with the West. As noted by Sezer (2000) dialogue and cooperation between Ankara and Moscow in the 1990s stems from Russia's weakness and Turkey's isolation from the West. Aktürk (2006) develops the idea of weak Russia and argues that cooperation is a result of decreasing power asymmetry between Ankara and Moscow, and thereby declining threat perception by Turkey from the north (p. 346-348). The disappearance of the Soviet threat has also reduced Turkey's dependence on the Western security umbrella and conveyed more possibilities for Turkish foreign policymaking in Eurasia. The argument of isolation from the West is also developed to understand the Turkish-Russian partnership in the

2000s. The decreasing quality of relations with the West is thus considered a major catalyst of the Turkish-Russian partnership. (Hill & Taspinar, 2006; Kınıklıoğlu & Morkva, 2007) Similarly, Weitz (2010) argues that deteriorating relations with the US and the EU drive Turkey “*to look eastward*” (p. 85).

Most analyses of Turkish-Russian relations have been informed by either power politics (Aktürk, 2006; Köstem, 2020), economic pragmatism (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016; Köstem, 2018), or both (Sezer, 2000; Weitz, 2010). Realist explanations fail to explain the current pace of relationship because, despite political divergences and increasing Russian military might in Turkey's neighborhood, there is hardly any increase in Ankara's threat perception from Moscow. Economic interests also fall short of explaining Turkey's political relations with Russia. Although economic pragmatism is important, economic interests have not been decisive in shaping Ankara's foreign policy. Turkey's strong economic ties with the European Union, Israel, and the USA did not prevent the deterioration of bilateral relations or the emergence of a highly critical tone of Ankara's discourse. Both realist and liberal explanations, which depend on material factors and the ruling elite's rationality, do not elaborate on why compartmentalization is possible and effective in the example of Turkish-Russian relations, but not in other cases.

Moreover, all these accounts are unsatisfactory to explain Ankara's insistence and will to cooperate with its colossal neighbor, which is getting more powerful at the expense of Turkey. The restoration of mutual trust and confidence after the jet crisis was very sudden. The assessments based on material conditions are short of explaining this confidence-building and trust in bilateral relations; thus, there is a need to assess Moscow's image in Turkish decision-makers' eyes. The geopolitical rivalry between Ankara and Moscow does not automatically color Russia as a rival in Turkish foreign policymaking, and an “other” in Turkish geopolitical imagining. This mindset makes it possible to establish durable cooperation although foreign policy agendas and aims of the two states seem incompatible. Thus, the ideational factors should necessarily be added to the analysis to understand Turkish foreign policy towards Russia.

There are some efforts to bring out intangible factors to analyzing the Turkish-Russian relationship. Çelikpala (2015) argues that “*although Turkey's geopolitical position has not changed ... there was a fundamental transformation in Turkish public and decision-makers' perceptions of Russia and the Russians during the last decade of relationship with Russia*” (p.131). Although Çelikpala (2015) points out the changes in geopolitical imagination and

bilateral perceptions, he does not elucidate the underlying reasons for the possibility of such ideational changes. Köstem (2020) also remarks the necessity of understanding the ideational factors in the case of Turkish-Russian alignment despite the fact that he bases his arguments only on material conditions (p. 17).

Turkey's relationship with Russia is also related to Turkey's search for a geopolitical identity. The spatial identities are far from static, and under constant re/construction (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995, p. 3-7). Accordingly, Ankara's framing of the world, the West, and Eurasia are dynamic and often unstable. The following section discusses the construction and employment of Eurasia in Turkish foreign policymaking, particularly in recent decade.

An Axis to Eurasia?

In 2012, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then the Prime Minister, joked with Putin that Turkey can be a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) instead of the European Union (EU). However, he was more serious in January 2013, when he claimed on a TV show that the SCO can be a better alternative to the EU: *"I recently said to Mr. Putin: 'Take us into the Shanghai Five; do it, and we will say farewell to the EU, leave it altogether. Why all this stalling?'"* The vital point in his statement was the emphasis on the shared values between Turkey and the SCO countries: *"The Shanghai Five is better and more powerful, and we have common values with them"* (Hürriyet, 2013). In the same year, he repeated his wish to Putin: *"Allow us into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and save us from this trouble (waiting for the EU membership)"* (Kucera, 2013). He continued to express his idea afterward the failed coup attempt in 2016. *"Why shouldn't Turkey be in the Shanghai Five? I said this to Mr. Putin, to Nazarbayev, to those who are in Shanghai Five now... I think if Turkey were to join the Shanghai Five, it will enable it to act with much greater ease"* (Reuters, 2016). After all these statements that expose the wish of the Turkish leadership, Turkey is still not a member of the SCO. These proclamations, however, were more than a covet for being a member of a regional security organization, rather they were an explicit message about Turkey's changing feelings and considerations and imaginations about the West and Eurasia.

Turkey, a successor of an empire, has long suffered an identity crisis, which also produced a vagueness in the geopolitical understanding and discourse. Foreign policy is also boundary-producing practice, as explicit in Turkey's relations with its neighbors in recent decades. Friends and foes, threats and opportunities are all shaped according to Turkish elite perception regarding where Turkey belongs: Europe, the Islamic world, the Turkic world, or Eurasia? Turkish policymakers continuously re/construct their claims about the

necessities of global politics and Turkey's survival, and try to defend their new positions regarding the developments in the neighborhood. Thus, the hierarchy of spaces in Turkish foreign policymaking alters in line with the changes in geopolitical imaginations and narratives. One well-discussed example is the Middle East, which has been understood in various ways in recent decades, ranging from a swamp of insecurities to an area of opportunity (Aras & Polat, 2007), or an aspect of Turkey's strategical depth and strength (Davutoğlu, 2001). Another important change in Turkey's geopolitical imagination is the way that Eurasia is understood (Aras & Fidan, 2008). Eurasia has become a neighbor out of an "other". Today, there is enough evidence to argue that Eurasia evolves into a "self" that Turkey locates itself in.

Eurasia in Turkish politics can best be understood in the context of relations with the West. Turkey had uneasy relations with the US because of the differences in their Middle East policies, particularly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Widespread street protests in summer 2013, popularly called Gezi Park protests, were seen by Ankara as being part of a Western-backed attempt to topple down the government (Bilgiç, 2018, p. 274). The crisis with both the EU and the US regarding Turkey's fight with PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorism, and their reluctant and late condemnation of the coup attempt in 2016 marked another turning point for Turkish foreign policy. Turkish ruling elite believes that the US was behind the attempt (Ergin, 2019). Washington and Brussels' hesitancy to assist Turkey in its struggle against the activities of the PKK and the FETÖ (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization) led to a sharp increase in anti-Western sentiment among the ruling elite. Thus, Turkey, a longtime NATO member and a prospected member of the EU, has become more and more suspicious about the sincere friendship of the Western powers.

Ankara's political activism under the Justice and Development Party, and its increasing cooperation with Russia have raised questions about its foreign policy orientation among the Western academic and policy circles. The doubts about Turkey's commitment to the West increased with the problematic relations with the EU and Israel after 2009. Many observers question if there is a "*shift of axis*" in Turkish foreign policy (Başer, 2015; Erşen, 2011). Meanwhile, Turkish policy makers have adamantly tried to convince their allies that Turkey's main direction is still towards the West. (CNNTURK, 12 June 2010; CNNTURK, 14 June 2010) According to Stephen Larrabee, an expert at the RAND corporation, Turkey does not turn its back to the West, but only tries to orient its foreign policy to the new realities of the post-Cold War order and enjoys the opportunities of the new international environment due to its increasing ties with the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Ankara pursues a more

flexible and autonomous foreign policy agenda as the Western security umbrella is not so binding as before (Larrabee, 2010, p. 158). According to Erşen (2011) Russia represents only one dimension in Ankara's multidimensional foreign policy (p. 279).

In the meantime, Erdoğan's critical tone towards Western allies has become increasingly vocal. These criticisms are on the one hand a message to the Western states that Turkey is in search of a respected place in current international politics, on the other hand, it is a message for the domestic audience that Turkey is strong enough not to bow to the unjust treatments of the West. Turkey's geopolitical narrative has changed from one where integration with the West seems to be the ultimate goal, to a new one where problematic relations with the West have normalized. This change is not only about the nature and quality of relations with the West but more about the meaning of the West as a geopolitical, historical, and cultural entity for Turkey's foreign policymakers. In a nutshell, it is the value of the West in Turkish geopolitical imagination that affects the current direction of Turkish foreign policy. Narratives about the West's heinous intentions against Turkey paved a way to Turkey's orientation toward Eurasia as an alternative civilizational home.

Thus, Turkey's orientation to Eurasia is mainly triggered by the worsening relations with the West. Yanık (2019) points out that *"... since the end of the Cold War, the extensive engagement and re-engagement with the post-Soviet space and then Russia, combined with Turkey's perception of real or perceived unequal and unfair treatment by its Western or Atlanticist allies, has led to an increase in the ways Eurasia and Eurasianism is used and understood in Turkey"* (p. 45). Ankara, feeling isolated or sidelined in its relations with the Western countries, considers that it can find better ways to communicate with the Eurasian powers. The post-Soviet space, now popularly called Eurasia, earned an exclusively affirmative meaning in Turkish parlance after the Cold War. The region transformed from a geopolitical other to a region of cooperation, opportunities, alternatives, and sometimes even 'us'. Eurasia possesses a privileged position in political, intellectual, and public sphere, as a rising power base, an alternative to the Western-led world system, and a more suitable geopolitical homeland for Turkey's civilizational identity.

Although Eurasia has turned into a much more Russian-dominated geography over time, cooperation in this region between Ankara and Moscow has gradually become visible (Çelikpala, 2015). For Turkey Eurasia has emerged as the geography, where it can establish ties on the basis of equality based on mutual consent and respect to sovereign rights when compared with the West. The wish to be treated as an equal partner increases Turkey's affirmative

understanding of Eurasian countries vis-à-vis the EU countries. Of course, this perspective overlooks the humiliation of the Ottoman armies against the Russian military power in the 18th and 19th centuries, and present-day asymmetry in relations with Moscow.

The Eurasian perspective (a broader one than that of Turkish Eurasianism) in Turkish politics is also related to the perennial search for Turkish identity. As a geographical term, Eurasia is one of the most imprecise ones. Its borders are not settled in politics and academia. Eurasia can be seen as a part of either Turkic or Russian worlds. It can be defined as either an intersection or union of Europe and Asia. Its utilization in Turkish politics makes the meaning of Eurasia even more complex since seculars, conservatives, nationalists, and leftists all have their own versions of Eurasia and Eurasianism (Erşen, 2013, p. 25). The lack of a unitary idea about Eurasia is a natural result of the Turkey's search for an identity and will to redefine its international role (Yanık, 2019, p. 35). Turkey's turn to Eurasia is mostly a turn to Russia, because of its increasing role in Turkey's foreign and energy policy. As Yanık (2019) argues, "*The common point in most state and non-state uses of Eurasianism or the JDP's 'turn to Eurasia' is the fact that the terms Eurasia and Eurasianism were transformed into concepts overtly indicating a pro-Russian attitude in Turkey's foreign policy*" (p. 44). In other words, it is not only Turkish Eurasianism, but the popular consumption of the word Eurasia has lifted the image of Russia in Turkish politics. The following part discusses the improvement of the Russian image in Turkish politics in recent years.

Russia in Turkish Mirror

The new geopolitical imagination of Turkey has asked for a new storyline for Turkey's relations with Russia and the West. Thus, the shifting meanings of spaces are an important aspect of Turkish foreign policymaking. At this juncture, Turkey and Russia, long-time neighbors and rivals in the Black Sea and its littoral, enjoy cordial relations and increasing cooperation in many areas in recent years. Cooperation in the Syrian crisis, deepening energy ties, and Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile system has astonished the observers since Turkey now not only develops its economic and cultural ties but also ironically deepens its political and military cooperation with a NATO rival. Ankara even defines the current level of bilateral relations as "*strategic partnership based on mutual trust*" with some degree of exaggeration (Hacıoğlu, 2018). Remarkably, increasing Russian military might is barely understood as a direct threat to Turkish security. Thus, bilateral cooperation keeps its pace when the Russian military presence in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean has increased

at the expense of Turkey. Moreover, opposing foreign and security policies in the neighborhood do not automatically put the two powers into antagonistic camps. Russia today is a 'trustable' partner which shares the same geopolitical space and civilizational basin with Turkey, i.e., Eurasia. Thus, increasing Russian power is not always an unpleasant development in the Turkish ruling elite's mindset.

Russia acted as a reliable neighbor after the coup attempt in July 2016. Putin's telephone call and support for the legitimate government boosted the image of Russia among Turkey's ruling elite. On July 25, just after the failed coup, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu noted, "*We thank the Russian authorities, particularly President Putin. We have received unconditional support from Russia, unlike other countries*" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2016). Speaking at the ceremony for the completion of the offshore section of the TurkStream Project, Erdoğan stated, "*To us, the Russian Federation is a reliable friend, with whom we can have a long-term cooperation and an important natural gas supplier as in the example of this project*" (TCCB, 2018.)

The similarities between Russia and Turkey, real or perceived, play a role in Turkey's conception of Russia. Imperial nostalgia, Western-skepticism, and strong leadership are among those similarities between Turkish and Russian politics. National glory and great power image are essential for both countries due to their imperial past. They both have a sphere of influence, and consider themselves responsible regional powers rather than ordinary nation-states. Russia and Turkey try to turn their cultural and historical bonds into an economic and political influence in their neighborhood via a civilizational based foreign policy (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2011).

Meanwhile, Russia, a critique of the American-dominated world and a defender of a multipolar international system, becomes increasingly attractive to Turkish political elite. Unhappy with the post-Cold War order, Putin's Russia challenges American unilateralism and asking for a more democratic multipolar world-system. Russia, being an ardent supporter of the current UN Security Council structure, pretends to be a reformer in the international system owing to its critics against the American-led military operations after the Cold War. According to Moscow, the West is interventionist and disrespectful to state sovereignty by employing liberal democracy and human rights. The Kremlin's stress on local traditional values instead of cosmopolitanism also receives a positive reaction from the national/conservative perspectives throughout the world including Turkey.

Both Turkey and Russia have charismatic leaders who are committed to state greatness and a national revival and are believed to protect the stability and security of the state. Putin and Erdoğan are also seen as the leaders of their civilizational basin who resist the expansion of Western civilization. Their commitment to the preservation of traditional values may also have helped them to develop a common language in their frequent contacts in recent years. While the relations with the West have institutional character and mainly depend on historical processes, relations Russia have the potential to flourish immediately, just due to the will of the leaders (Baev & Kirişçi, 2017, p. 11-14).

Erdoğan, who enjoys a significant role in Turkey's foreign policy formulation for about two decades, considers his Russian counterpart as a sincere leader who wills to cooperate (Habertürk, 2019). He frequently addresses the Russian leader as "*Dear Friend Putin (dostum Putin)*". This is the language employed by Turkey to Russia in all negotiations about the divergent foreign policy strategies. In an interview with a Russian TV channel, the Turkish president claimed that the regional problems could only be solved with Russia and Turkey's cooperation. The language used was both respectful and friendly: "*in the joint fight against terrorism in this region, I will need the support of my dear respected friend Vladimir*" (Hürriyet, 2016). Russian President remarked Erdoğan is a leader who "*keeps his word like a real man*". President Erdoğan similarly replied the compliment, "*He is really a man of his word, a man honoring his promises. Given our bilateral ties, there are indeed few countries with which we enjoy such robust relations. I hope our relations, which we have maintained thus far, will continue as they are in the future as well. I see this in every issue, be it political, military, diplomatic, cultural or economic*" (TCCB, 2020).

Turkish leadership considers that the purchase of the S-400 and the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant are related to its sovereignty and destined rise in global politics (RFERL, 2017). Thus, it is more than a military deal with Russia and includes a symbolic message to the West that Turkey can act independently. Accordingly, Erdoğan answered the critics, "*Nobody has the right to discuss the Turkish Republic's independence principles or independent decisions about its defense industry*" (Gall and Higgins, 2017).

Although leaders of both states do not refrain from using strong language and uttering harsh critics towards Western states, they generally avoid employing a similar language for each other. Their discourse is characterized by the low profile statements and the obvious reluctance to escalate the crises. The positive language is also a message to the West. They both want to show that they are not alone and have friends to work with. In other words, differences in

foreign policy objectives did not make Turkey and Russia antagonist neighbors automatically, which is especially visible in the Syrian conflict. Although they have clashing interests, Russia backs the Syrian regime under Assad while Turkey supports the opposition, and a civil war has been ongoing for years between two fronts, the two countries found a common language to discuss the issue and formed a peace process, mainly discussed at Astana and Sochi.

Accordingly, tactical silence and careful rhetoric has emerged as an essential strategy of Turkish foreign policy towards Russia, first concerning the crises and conflicts in the former Soviet space and recently in the Middle East (Çelikpala, 2015, p. 138). After the war in Georgia, Turkey claimed that the crisis should be deescalated. Although Turkey's political stance favors Georgia as the integrity of Georgia is always underlined, the language was careful not to offend the Russians (Weitz, 2010, p. 80; Larrabee, 2010, p. 168). A similar attitude is also visible during the Ukrainian crisis. The Russian annexation of Crimea is an excellent example to understand Ankara's careful language. Russia seized the control of Crimea, shortly after the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv. In May 2014, the Russian parliament accepted the reunification of Crimea to the Russian Federation. This was one of the unique developments after WWII that a country annexes a territory. It was a result of increasing Russian activity in the former Soviet space. Turkey has never accepted what happened in Crimea and did not stop to pronounce Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, different from many other NATO members, Ankara did not directly criticize Moscow, and did not apply any sanctions against Russia. Erdoğan many times claimed that *"Turkey does not recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea"*, but he evaded from directly accusing Russia of that action (CNNTURK, 2015; Kirim Haber Ajansı, 2020). Balcer (2014) is right in pointing out that *"the word 'Russia' has not once been mentioned directly in the numerous official statements by the Turkish Foreign Ministry on the topic of Ukraine and Crimea"* (p. 3).

The discourse of the Syrian crisis is also worth mentioning. Although Turkey sees Assad of Syria, a tyrant who dispersed his own nation, and argues that there is no common ground to agree with, it can cooperate with Russia, the main sponsor of Assad. Russia is framed positively, even in the environment of a possible military confrontation. Turkey selected to condemn and criticize the Western involvement, while generally staying mute about the Russian actions as in the example of the bombardment of Aleppo in 2016. Turkey has usually refrained from pronouncing the discrepancies between Russian and Turkish foreign policy objectives. Turkey explained the crisis in Idlib - a Syrian city inhabited by millions of domestic immigrants, terrorist organizations and opposition groups- in February 2020, as a confrontation with the Syrian regime

rather than with Russia. Ankara raised some criticisms towards Moscow, but evaded from claiming Russia as the responsible side for killing many Turkish soldiers in the region.

Turkey's imagined Russia has traditionalist ideas, geographical characteristics similar to Turkey, and that imagination boosts the image of Russia. The last section argues that the positive conception of Eurasia and Russia in Turkish foreign policy making is the basic motivation behind the rapid normalization of relations after the jet crisis.

From Crisis to Cooperation

The downing of a Russian jet by Turkish air forces on 24 November 2015 and the ruining of bilateral ties have shocked the observers because they happened during the "*golden age of Turkish-Russian relations*" (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 77). Spring in relations turned into winter when Vladimir Putin called the Turkish action a "*stab in the back*" committed by "*accomplices of terrorists*", and threatened Ankara with severe consequences (RIA, 2015; BBC, 24 November 2015). Moscow abruptly punished Ankara with harsh economic sanctions, a tradition of Putin's Russia in crises with neighbors. Turkish tone was less antagonistic and underlined the sadness for what happened despite defending the correctness of the action (BBC, 28 November 2015). Later many scenarios were debated among policy circles and in the media, including the possibility of a direct military confrontation between Ankara and Moscow. The reaction of the pro-Kremlin Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov was threatening. He shared a message in a social network on the very same day of the incident, "*I have no doubt that Turkey will regret it for a very long time. Those who speak about friendship and cooperation on every occasion do not act that treacherously.*" (TASS, 2015) Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the ultra-nationalist Russian politician, even mentioned using an atomic bomb against Turkey (Gazeta, 2015). The mood was no different in Turkey, albeit more cautious and anxious about the consequences of the rupture. A Turkish academic enthusiastically claimed on TV that "*We have fought Russia twelve times in the past. We do not want to fight Russia, but if necessary we will*" (Ahaber, 2016). During the crisis, the history of Russia and Turkey relations were remembered and constructed with mutual antagonism. In the span of the jet crisis, Russia was spatialized as a geography from which emanating danger and threats to Turkish security. The portrayal of the past relations with wars and conflicts helped construct a convincing narrative.

Turkish-Russian relations would be normalized after seven months of a diplomatic rift when Turkey stepped back and declared a formal apology on 26

June 2016, for the downing of the Russian jet, and when Russia showed the willingness in restoring the relationship (BBC, 27 June 2016). Afterward, Ankara and Moscow not only developed their relations at a quick pace but also often underscored the necessity to preserve cordial ties against assumed Western attacks. According to the Turkish perception, foreign actors who are unhappy with the Turkish-Russian cooperation are more dangerous for bilateral relations than any political divergence between the two neighbors. Turkish politicians and journalists portray the downing of the Russian jet in Turkey as a conspiracy to sow discord between Ankara and Moscow (Aljazeera, 2016; Diler, 2019). Just after the coup attempt during his visit to St. Petersburg President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed that *"Today it is well understood that the Fetullah Terrorist Organization and the powers behind it also targeted the relations between Turkey and Russia"* (TCCB, 2016). The Russians also considered certain American actions in the region similarly. (TASS, 2019) During his visit to Turkey in January 2020, Putin has claimed that *"Despite the complex international situation, and the attempts of a number of global players to hinder the expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation between our countries, our work is proceeding steadily"* (Kremlin, 2020).

In the aftermath of the jet crisis, the relationship between Turkey and Russia transformed into a new one in which peace and cooperation are considered the normal state of affairs, only if the sinister West did not intervene. Thus, the narrative of the jet crisis and the realities of the Russian-Turkish relations were reconstructed. The spatialization of "us and them", "friend and foe" dichotomies changed, and political rhetoric conveyed Russia a positive geographic meaning. The narrative about Russia is not a change from a past enemy to a present friend. Rather, Russia as a neighbor was reconstructed in Turkish politics in a way that the relationship from past to present was characterized by a friendship. Thus, the recent crisis is narrated as a misunderstanding or a misdirection, but not an outcome of rational and pragmatic foreign and security policies. In brief, the normal state of affairs between Ankara and Moscow is considered to be peace and partnership, particularly by the Turkish ruling elite.

The reasons for the perseverance of Turkish-Russian cooperation after the jet crisis and the success in the compartmentalization of bilateral relations despite many geopolitical issues between Ankara and Moscow are intriguing. Two alternative explanations can be put forward for Ankara's will to cooperate with Russia. If it is the material factors that facilitate cooperation, the fear and concern about the possible actions of a stronger neighbor should be the motivation of Turkish decision-makers. According to this perspective, Turkey's foreign policy towards Russia should aim to evade alienating the stronger

neighbor. If the cooperation is based on intangible factors, then the meaning of the Russian power in Turkish foreign policymaking should necessarily be taken into account. The latter explanation argues that there might be a decrease in Turkey's threat perception, although material conditions claim the opposite. Thus, what constructs Turkey's security and foreign policy is not only competing armies or economies but also competing images. The domestic atmosphere and the geopolitical culture in Turkey affect the threat perceptions and the views about the regional and international environment.

The downing of a Russian jet was the gravest crisis between Russia and Turkey after the Cold War, which made a direct military confrontation a possibility. However, when the crisis was over, Turkey's understanding of Russia became so positive that the Russian military actions would rarely be part of Turkey's security discourse although the changes in the military balances in Turkey's neighborhood were dramatic. In the last decade, military balance in both north and south of Turkey, i.e., in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, has changed in favor of Russia. Russia controls the long coast and possesses a significant portion of the exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea after the annexation of Crimea. New Russian troops and strategic weapons have been directed to the Crimean peninsula in recent years (Gressel, 2021, p. 7-12). However, Russia's aggressions and expansionist policies in its south at the expense of Georgia and Ukraine hardly harm Moscow's relationship with Turkey. The situation in the Middle East has also some parallels. Russian influence over the Syrian government increased after the Russian intervention in 2015 to save the Assad regime. Tartus and Khmeimim, Russia's naval and air bases in Syria, have transformed into formidable operation centers in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia has deployed the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems in military bases in Crimea and Syria.

Turkey's positive imagining of Russia did not prevent the escalation of the divergent objectives between Ankara and Moscow in Syria into a serious crisis in November 2015. However, it helped the rehabilitation of relationship in the following year. Most importantly, the crisis itself is not portrayed as one between two rivals but just a plot by their enemies to sow discord between Ankara and Moscow.

However, except for the seven months crisis period, Turkey is reluctant to discuss the potential outcomes of the rising military and political power of Russia. Despite the Russian involvement in Syria, which was a certain blow on the Turkish interests in the region, the two states comfortably sit on the diplomacy table. Moreover, Russia was portrayed as a positive factor for the

peace and stability of the Middle East. Ankara continues to see the full side of the glass in the relationship with Moscow (Çelikpala, 2015, p. 135). The changing perceptions are more convenient to understand fostering relations between Russia and Turkey than the changes in material conditions. Nonetheless, it is not unlikely that the Turkish ruling elite's perception of Russia plays a role in exaggerating the current quality of relations.

Conclusion

As Ankara's spatial conceptions of the world change, the Turkish decision-makers redefine friends and enemies. Accordingly, in the Turkish mapping of the world, Eurasia has gained a positive geographic value, and Russia has emerged as a significant partner. Turkey's spatial understanding of Eurasia and the West is important to understand the resilience of bilateral partnership: while the former is conceived as a rising and egalitarian geography, the latter is understood as imperialist, Islamophobic, and having a crusader mentality. Thus, Turkey's turn to Eurasia is more a shift of geopolitical imagination rather than a shift of axis. It is not still alliances or agreements that are changing but geopolitical understandings and imagination. This is mainly because Ankara's geopolitical imageries put Russia in a positive place where threat perception is minimal (except for crisis times), while the West has increasingly been portrayed as the 'other' of Turkey despite the continuing military alliance and strong economic ties. Thus, Russia—a historical rival of Turkey and the pivotal country of the Eurasian geography—finds a favorable place in Turkish geopolitical imagination, which cannot be explained with the rising economic ties. What is striking is that the dramatic decrease in Turkish perception of the Russian threat is not because of weakening Russia's military power but rather due to the change in Ankara's understanding of that power.

In a nutshell, Turkey constructs Russia as a geopolitical friend rather than a geopolitical rival. By so doing, Turkey finds a neighbor rather than an opponent to cooperate in the regional crises. This conception has also helped the rapid normalization of bilateral relations after the jet crisis. The normalization process has shown Turkey's readiness and will to work with Russia even though military and political variables should affect differently. Today, although both states continue to preserve their foreign policy positions, they emphasize diplomatic processes rather than the level of differences. The overlooked disagreements (in Syria, Libya, Crimea), the exaggeration of economic partnership (the aim of having a trading volume of 100 billion dollars), and the reconstructed narrative about the downing of the Russian jet have all aimed to stress the historical persistence of cooperation without any solid base. The articulation of

constructive discourse, emphasis on the areas of partnership, and the reluctance to voice conflictual issues have helped foster bilateral ties in the 2000s. However, the success of a compartmentalized relationship is due to Turkey's continuing imagination of Russia as a positive factor for Turkish interests and security.

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